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How forums and collaborative learning impact on oral proficiency in a foreign language class

Student Dissertation

How to cite:

Ruiz, Tommy (2016). How forums and collaborative learning impact on oral proficiency in a foreign language class. Research Summary for the Open University module H818 The Networked Practitioner

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SAT: How forums and collaborative learning impact on oral proficiency in a foreign language class. (Tommy Ruiz)

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6 January 2016

Using a class activity and its inclusive online collaborative component (open educational resources (OER), Moodle and its forums) the teacher recorded students who would not regularly speak during class time. This presentation discusses the importance of collaborative learning, digital methods and how students perceive their educational learning through an online community. Focusing primarily on the theme of inclusion, the interpretivist lens allows the teacher to focus on ethnographic data collected to extract key concepts. The presentation concludes by outlining the importance of collaborative learning and its impact on inclusive learning.

This presentation explores:

- How collaborative learning is implemented in a foreign language class.
- How and why it helps oral proficiency.
- To what extent forums compliment collaborative learning in a foreign language class.

While interest in the voice of students and teenagers has grown, concerns for their oral participation in a foreign language class can still be a daunting experience for some (Hewitt and Stephenson, 2012). For those excluded, the teacher needs to implement a safe, positive learning environment where students can feel at ease. Personal growth is mostly achieved whilst connecting, comparing and challenging your peers' work. As a result, carefully structured group work or collaborative learning has been promoted at the international school of Kuala-Lumpur (ISKL) for a number of years. When applied to a foreign language class, collaborative learning creates random conversations. It focuses on shared knowledge and clear communication skills between students.

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When learning a foreign language, not all students learn at the same pace. Therefore pupils do not have the same learning outcomes. Consequently, a class activity that promotes collaborative learning needs to be tailored for the students' individual needs. As a result, critical theory (Curseu and Pluut, 2013) suggests that students should work collaboratively in small groups to fulfil their potential whilst avoiding some of the peer pressure issues. Effective communicators listen, reflect and respect each other's ideas. Students need to take part in conversations to be accepted and thus included in the learning process. Each student should be a creative thinker who can reason critically. They need to defend viewpoints, argue and share experiences. In that context, oral participation is a crucial component towards inclusion.

Placing a similar emphasis on the role of forums, Norvig (2012) views the latter as a platform where communication helps students clarify problems, negotiate meanings, exchange knowledge and share perspectives. Whilst language acquisition is usually linked to input-driven, listening and thus passive learning is as important (Lefkowitz and Hedgcock, 2002). In this context, forums are an extension of the collaborative learning and a reflection tool. Forums allow students to listen to their peers, learn from good examples, engage in critical reasoning and promote a monitored inclusive learning environment.

This presentation will appeal to teachers who are looking for an inclusive approach to enhance an open scholarly practice, as well as those individuals who would like to learn about the forums in a collaborative online learning environment. The presentation will explore an analysis of participant contributions, survey data, and questionnaires to propose a model for collaborative learning in a foreign language class.

References:

Curseu, P and Pluut, H (2013) Students groups as learning entities: *the effect of group diversity and teamwork quality on groups' cognitive complexity* in: Studies in higher education vol.38, no. 1, February 2013, pp87-103.

Hewitt, E and Stephenson, J (2012) *Foreign language anxiety and oral exam performance: a replication of Phillip's MLJ study* in: the modern language journal, volume 96, issue 2, pages 170-189, Summer 2012.

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Norvig, P (2012) The 100,000-student classroom in:

https://www.ted.com/talks/peter_norvig_the_100_000_student_classroom?language=en

Lefkowitz, N and Hedgcock, J (2002) *Sound barriers: influences of social prestige, peer pressure and teacher (dis) approval on FL oral performance* in: Language teaching research 6,3 (2002); pp223-244.

Extra content

1. Transcript

2. 1. **Schools are not just a knowledge based environment**

At the heart of my approach, Gewirtz's view (2008) on inclusion resonates with my philosophy. I believe schools are not just a knowledge-based environment, but also a place where pupils develop their social skills, as well as enhance their thinking process. She noted that social inclusion in schools could have long-term effects. In fact, I believe personal growth can only be achieved whilst connecting, comparing and challenging your peers. This, in the long term would create lifelong learners.

Curseu and Pluut (2013) suggest that students should be in small groups to fulfill their potential whilst avoiding some of the peer pressure issues. The groups should be individualized to maximize learning. As a result the groups need to be tailored.

1. 2. **According to Curseu and Pluut (2013), the groups need to be as diverse as possible:**

Collaborative learning can only be successful when the composition of the group has been optimized. Curseu and Pluut (2013) explore the impact of the group diversity. They demonstrate that the group should be as diverse as they can possibly be. More specifically groups with a wide range of nationality, gender and characteristics. I think it is important to highlight my environment. Being in an international school is a very specific field and this research might not apply to most school in the UK.

With mixed ability groups and **what Anna mentioned in the comment in the cloud**, the groups can be competitive amongst themselves. The purpose of collaborative learning is to do well as a group. Therefore it is crucial that students help each other. For example, the most able student can model the answer, and the others would change few bits to make it their own. Within the same group a student can become "the teacher" and lead the conversation.

Curseu and Pluut reinforce the argument. The more diverse the group is, the more creative and effective it becomes. Also, an internationally diverse group enables many prospects. The group will have different life experiences and different point of views, therefore will have more to share.

Curseu and Pluut emphasize the concept that a less pressured environment lead to better results. If Students value the activity they become risk takers because they trust each other. This concept resonates with Arnot and Reay's (2012) argument. The idea of not being judged and being able to share personal information with peers is crucial in creating social relationships. Teachers should praise rather than threat to get best results! **This is what John Kerr was mentioning in the comment. This Vygotskyan approach is the backbone of my research.**

To support this however, strong expectations and a clear rubric are needed. Student should always feel that there is a purpose and a goal for the activity.

1. 3. **Networked practitioner:**

As part of the networked practitioner, I referred back to proteacher.net to share the practice, raise issues on inclusion using examples to possibly reflect on the methodology. However, several difficulties were met. First of all, the forum has a filtering system. This translates as a serious delay. The administration needs to approve the message (as long as two week) and at times relocate it in the correct forum if needed. Secondly, the online community can be volatile and slow during December (end of term exams, holidays...). So, I joined another one! The online community was extremely active and positive. I managed to get a few hints on how to modify some aspects of the research.

1. 4. **Oral part of learning a foreign language can be a daunting experience (Hewitt & Stephenson, 2012)**

The oral part of learning a foreign language can be a daunting experience for some students (Hewitt and Stephenson, 2012). There are numerous reasons. Firstly, students find it difficult to speak in front of their peers. Peer pressure in foreign language classes is still a serious issue (Lefkowitz and Hedgcock, 2002). The authors argue that the concept of power in foreign language classes is directly linked with oral proficiency. As a result, the classroom needs to be an inclusive positive learning environment where every student can feel at ease with their speaking.

1. 5. **The class activity**

For the class activity, groups of three or four students were created. In those group talks, student focused on using the target language for at least five minutes. During each session, the teacher sat with a group and took part in the conversation when needed. The other groups recorded their conversations using MP3 recorders. At the end of the lesson, they sent the recordings to the teacher by email. Before the following lesson, the teacher gave detailed feedback to the students. Using a detailed rubric, every student was told the stage he/she was working at and what he/she had to do to improve. After each class activity, the teacher selected one recorded conversation and uploaded it on Moodle. The students had to listen to the conversation, create a thread on the forum linked to the conversation, and reflect on their own progress.

1. 6. **The group-talk activity creates opportunities for students to learn from their peers and reuse the language learnt (Dobao, 2014)**

To recap; the group talk focuses on shared knowledge. Students in a group need to take part in conversations to be accepted and thus included in the learning process. They need to defend viewpoints, argue and share experiences. In that context, oral participation is crucial in foreign language classes. In terms of pedagogy, Booth (2011) preconizes for the group to have a community feel. Within the group, every student should be responsible and have a duty. Every child matters, and therefore every point of view should be respected. The group talk is a perfect place to be accepted and develop social skills through topics seen in class.

- 1. 7. **Moodle**
- 2. 8. **Networked practitioner:**

However, setting up forums in a school context, it is not as easy as Norvig (2012) mentioned. Over the two months process, I worked with Moodle and the Moodle specialist. First of all, the settings for Moodle are shared with the whole school. It is difficult to apply settings for one course only. At ISKL, forums are used as post boards where teachers make announcements. Students are not allowed to reply. The specialist had to go through Moodle forums and explore the myriad of different options, whilst considering the different demands and needs of all the teachers at ISKL. Ultimately, The teacher and the specialist decided to group students, create a group within the teacher's Moodle course and give rights to students only for this forum. Table 3 and 4 shows how a guest or in this case, several specialists explored the Moodle page to tackle the issue.

Reflection:

From the analysis of the TMA02 and the presentation, it is evident that students and the teacher saw a small progression of the oral part of learning French. SEveral students highlighted the benefits of collaborative learning. I found that students' progress was linked to the group talk activity and the collaborative learning. Furthermore it should be emphasized that the networked element is crucial to optimize the outcomes of activities such as the forum and an effective use of Moodle. Finally, by March, the networked practitioner will have collected more data from teacherattoz.net and will be able to explore different angle for the class activity.



[tommy.ruiz](#)

00:52 on 10 February 2016

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Embedded Content

Contribute

Discussion (8)

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[John Kerr](#)

7:28pm 6 January 2016 [Permalink](#)

Hi Tommy,

Seems like a very interesting subject area.

The methodology here appears to fall heavily to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, where learners have a Zone that they will learn they most from and often the lecturer sits outside that zone, while peers are deeply inside that learning zone, so small, concentrated groups work well.

I like the idea of using technology to increase classroom engagement such as Twitter polls or a Padlet wall. That way people who do not wish to stand up and voice something can do it another way. Interesting to see how this maybe used in a language class where a lot of the communication is verbal.

Looking forward to hopefully hearing your talk.
John



[tommy ruiz](#)

10:51am 13 January 2016 [Permalink](#)

Hey John,

Yes! You are absolutely right. I took a Vygotskian approach for this. The ZPD is essential to collaborative learning and I focused on that for the critical research.

Twitter and padlet wall are great ideas. Mini forums instead of Moodle forums could be something I focus later on. Thanks for the idea!



[Dr Carol Waites](#)

6:09pm 17 January 2016 [Permalink](#)

Hi Tommy

I am interested in your project as we work with Moodle and with adult second language learners, and my son is doing the IB at an international school! He is doing English, French and Italian and I can't see the teachers using this method, so maybe I can talk to

them about it.

I am interested in how you are using Moodle and I know the assignment part has a feature where they can record themselves. It's called poodl or suchlike. Will you get them to record themselves or will it be more asynchronous interaction?

Carol



[tommy ruiz](#)

4:12am 18 January 2016 [Permalink](#)

Hi Carol,

The students record their conversation using a MP3 recorder. They record the conversation at the same time (4 groups can create some back noise at times!) They then send it to me as an attachment and I mark it using a rubric a modified IB rubric.

Later on, I upload an interesting conversation on moodle for the students to listen to, share their viewpoints and hopefully learn about others' perspective. They can reflect on a forum based on moodle. This is new and I am still learning! It has been good so far.

The collaborative learning took time to set up. Once again, it is not that easy to 'teach' the benefits to have a constructive conversation. Kids usually want to have their own monologue...

Hope that helped!



[Anna Orridge](#)

3:45pm 26 January 2016 [Permalink](#)

Hi Tommy,

This is a very promising area for language teaching, I think. Do you have any thoughts as how it is best to organise collaboration as regards ability level. Is it a good idea to have advanced students support weaker ones, for example? Or are students more likely to progress when they are in groups with peers at around the same level. Or is lack of confidence rather than differing proficiency the more significant factor?

Anna



[tommy ruiz](#)

6:23am 27 January 2016 [Permalink](#)

Hey Anna,

Yes, mixed ability all the way.

It will all be explored in the presentation. You made good points and you are correct. Mixed ability groups promote sharing and are great for inclusion.



[Dr Simon Ball](#)

10:32am 14 February 2016 [Permalink](#)

Hi Tommy

Here is a summary of the questions/comments from your presentation - please respond as you wish:

- ▶ I completely agree about schools. It's hugely overlooked by exams, assessments etc. the importance of collaboration.
- ▶ It is particularly important that sts don't feel the pressure of grading at the early stages of collaboration.
- ▶ Balancing marks between collaborators within the group is often a problem.
- ▶ a really interesting example of the importance of diversity - thank you
- ▶ Younger the child - embarrassment impacts, ability to accept making a fool of yourself.
- ▶ 'good point' sharing personal information connected to collaboration
- ▶ Yes to praise and also 'e-stroking' to facilitate collaborative work and to give positive feedback that they are doing well
- ▶ I think there is research around students marking each other that starts off wobbly (and sometimes corrupt) but once practice is integrated, they give realistic marks that are v similar to what the tutor would have given. I don't know if there is specific research re collaborative work...but there might be!
- ▶ I find that one of the best ways to get sts to collaborate in small groups is to get one of them to be an 'expert' (on horses, karate, make-up techniques, whatever interests them). And I would agree that diversity within the group helps.
- ▶ I read an article once that suggested that a more confident learner can dominate collaborative learning and if they have misconceptions actually be more of a hindrance than a help. Is this something you've picked up in your research?
- ▶ The MP3 recording is such a great idea.
- ▶ Did you consider audio feedback as John has been exploring?
- ▶ we did a similar circle in second life for spanish language learning module - helped for distance learning.
- ▶ That was very well presented, some great points made, how about differentiation amongst the group did that work well with you in the mixed groups, almost like scaffold learning
- ▶ Very interesting perspective on stronger and weaker students. I think that young people enjoy helping others if the general environment is supportive.
- ▶ I think domination is an interesting issue - I know in adult groups others can sometimes be frozen out as they can give up when faced with stronger characters
- ▶ Students need to be rewarded for mixed ability outcomes. Bonus points for overcoming them?



[tommy ruiz](#)

7:08am 19 February 2016 [Permalink](#)

Hi,

- ▶ Did you consider audio feedback as John has been exploring?
- ▶ Yes! but time constraints made some great suggestions difficult to apply. I found that it was difficult enough to start a 'simple' activity like tge group talk. I intend on trying it soon!
- ▶ I think domination is an interesting issue - I know in adult groups others can sometimes be frozen out as they can give up when faced with stronger characters

Absloutely. I encountered this. It starts from early on sadly. I found that French speakers were the most difficult kids to deal with. They would answer the questions in a few words instead of exploring the concept.

- ▶ Students need to be rewarded for mixed ability outcomes. Bonus points for overcoming them?
- ▶ I disagree with bonus points in general. They inflate grades and give a false representation of a given task. However, I believe in food. So! Sometimes, IF a student over-performs, I would give them a croissant (surprisingly cheap in Malaysia!)

- ▶ Balancing marks between collaborators within the group is often a problem..
- ▶ Great idea! Again, time issues :(But it is next on my list!

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